

SUMMARY

Operationalizing and Developing the Habitat Partner University Initiative

June 2010

Björn Malbert, Chalmers University of Technology
Vanessa Watsson, University of Cape Town
Henrik Nolmark, Node AB

Disclaimer

The designations employed and the presentation of material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries regarding its economic system or degree of development. Excerpts may be reproduced without authorization, on condition that the source is indicated.

Views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, the United Nations and its member states.

This is a summary of the final report of a consultancy study commissioned by UN-HABITAT in order to further articulate the next phase in the development of the Habitat Partner University Initiative. The method used in the study is largely based on interviews with a number of selected university representatives and UN-Habitat staff.

Background to the study

UN-HABITAT has initiated the Habitat Partner Universities Initiative as a means of promoting cooperation between UN-HABITAT and institutions of higher education, as well as facilitating exchange and cooperation between universities in developing and developed nations. Habitat Partner Universities are seen by UN-HABITAT as institutions willing to promote the social and environmentally sustainable development of towns and cities in accordance with the UN Millennium Development Goals. The aim of the Habitat Partner Universities Initiative is for universities to become closer partners of cities, actively engaged in problem solving and collaborative learning, focusing on the education, research and training components of the Sustainable Urban development Network (SUDNet). In its Medium-term Strategic and Institutional Plan (MTSIP), UN-HABITAT states that the Habitat Partner Universities Initiative constitutes a crucial vehicle for advancing sustainable urbanization through education, research and knowledge.

The urbanization of poverty is one of the most daunting challenges of the 21st century. If cities are to come to terms with rapid levels of urbanization, they require leaders, managers and researchers capable of adopting innovative and robust approaches to planning, developing, managing and financing growth for all citizens.

Universities can contribute to sustainable urban development, but they face challenges in realizing this potential. In many UN-HABITAT focus countries, university lecturers and researchers have limited exposure to best practice in sustainable urban development. The findings of university research are often not being fully integrated into university curricula or mainstreamed by practitioners.

Overview of the Habitat Partner Universities initiative and type of activities

Although the program is still in its pilot stage, a wide range of activities have emerged from the collaboration. The potential scope of collaboration modalities is very wide, including research, education, knowledge management, and institutional strengthening. Some early results underscore the wide range of potential impact of the mechanisms. Some examples are listed below.

- Research work of students of the Norwegian University of Technology and Makerere University in Uganda is feeding into the sectoral studies underpinning the new Master Plan for Kampala.
- The Technical University of Helsinki is running a series of “Sustainable Communities” courses for young and mid-career professionals in collaboration with UN-HABITAT, UNEP, the University of Nairobi and the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok.
- A new Masters program on Urban Reconstruction and Development is being developed in collaboration with the University of Venice, preparing urban professionals for the challenges cities face in the wake of disasters.
- The University of British Columbia is creating a global urban knowledge management system called the “Habitat Archives”, an online archive for an urbanizing world, which will enable planners, administrators and other city building professionals to gain access to greater knowledge and experience in human settlement practice.
- The Chalmers University of Technology has entered into agreements with the University of Nairobi, and the Maseno University in Kisumu, Kenya, on joint “reality based” education modules. This has generated joint educational programs since 2005, and joint tutoring of PhD candidates.

Expectations, opportunities and benefits of the Habitat Partner Universities initiative

The views expressed in this study can be grouped into different types of potential benefits:

- A systematic approach to relations between UN-HABITAT and universities
- Awareness, competence and advocacy
- Habitat Partner Universities as a facilitating platform
- Specific benefits for universities

A systematic approach to relations between UN-HABITAT and universities

Most university involvement in UN-HABITAT activities has been based on individuals, in an ad-hoc manner in single projects or events. The drawbacks of this are a mutual lack of comprehensive understanding on the part of both UN-HABITAT and the universities regarding each others' competence and activities.

Structured modes of co-operation would help the formulation of a more structured research and educational agenda and a common pool of experts/expertise, including senior academics as well as students. UN-HABITAT staff can contribute with expertise in university work, e.g. in development of curricula and in the execution of courses and programs. Many interviewees expect that a more systematic approach would also result in a stronger involvement by universities in contributing to the Habitat agenda.

Increased visibility and advocacy for the Habitat agenda

The Habitat Partner Universities Initiative should be an instrument for building competence especially in the global south; it could contribute to highlighting new research issues and raising both the quantity and quality of urban research. The initiative can help in developing university curricula which responds to local demands, and also to help link universities to local authority training institutes.

It is important to improve the universities' awareness of what is going on within UN-HABITAT in order to promote the agency's agenda and visibility. The Habitat Partner Universities Initiative has the potential to cooperate with high profile universities and encourage them to make the Habitat agenda more widely recognized. Correspondingly, universities see a potential in the Habitat Partner Universities Initiative for promoting and highlighting research in sustainable urbanization. Increased visibility could also assist fundraising.

One comment raised in the Habitat Partner Universities initiative Side event at WUF was that by appointing effective and visible Habitat Partner Universities Focal Points at each partner university, a decentralized network of ambassadors at local level for the Habitat agenda could be developed as a side effect. Furthermore, by engaging students they can become advocates for the Habitat Agenda.

Habitat Partner Universities as a facilitating platform

UN-HABITAT, with its convening capacity, could provide a platform for addressing global urban development issues.

Several respondents expressed a need for an environment where there is the space for open discussion of new ideas, reflection and debate, but also for the general exchange of knowledge and experience, broadening and deepening insights into successes and failures in sustainable urban development in different local situations and contexts. Access to global data and contacts should not be dependent on individual networks, but be provided through a joint interaction.

It could also function as a platform for stimulating and catalyzing research projects. In relation to this, the Habitat Partner Universities Initiative can be a platform for fund raising, providing information on funding sources, e.g. national or EU research councils. UN-HABITAT can also have a quality assurance role. Further to this, UN-HABITAT can develop its role as an interface between universities, research funding organizations and end users of research results.

The Habitat Partner Universities Initiative could also facilitate other types of relevant activities, e.g. possible student exchange programs, important policy documents published, conferences and events etc.

Benefits for universities

- Enhancing the University's networking opportunities, relationships and international standing
- Enhancing teaching and learning in particular in various contexts in the global south
- Opening doors for universities, e.g. to policy and professional contexts; UN-HABITAT can help linking universities to policy-makers (brokerage role)
- Collaborations across disciplinary- and institutional borders. The Habitat Partner Universities Initiative could facilitate internal collaboration on urban issues across disciplines and departments within a university, and help to identify similar work and approaches in other participating universities.
- Staff exchanges, internships and supervision of internships will provide new perspectives and contacts, personal and professional development as well as better understanding between universities and UN-HABITAT.

- Enhancing the University's ability to attract international/global research funding. Having UN-HABITAT as a partner in a research consortium can give real credibility to the consortium and its research proposals.
- Attracting talented postgraduate students to the university
- Enhancing the postgraduate student experience, master thesis supervision
- Contribute to the branding of the university;

Challenges of the Habitat Partner Universities initiative

(i) The niche: Where can the Initiative add value to already existing partnerships, and what type of activities should be promoted?

(ii) Modus Operandi: What kind of links and fits should UN-HABITAT promote, and how can this be organized and financed?

(iii) Governance: What would be the best governance structure and secretariat arrangement to manage and support the Habitat Partner Universities network?

The challenges facing the initiative can be grouped into five main types of challenges and constraints:

- *Resource constraints*
- *Individual commitment*
- *University commitment*
- *Administrative and regulatory constraints at UN-HABITAT*
- *Supporting and sustaining networks*

Resource constraints

Universities, in particular in the global south, are chronically short of funds. Therefore any initiatives will need to be fully funded. However, UN-HABITAT is not a body which can directly fund research activities, which is one of the major incentives for universities to participate. This not only gives limitations to the activities but also makes the initiative as a whole dependent on external funding. Matching and balancing between ambitions and expectations on the one hand, and resources made available for realizing ideas on the other is crucial.

Individual commitment

People are busy, having little time to spend on general networking, cooperation and partnering without a clear purpose and agenda. The initiative thus should focus its work, and operate in such a manner where there are real, direct benefits for the current activities of both UN-HABITAT and the universities. Personal trust and contact is important, and respecting the different conditions for participating in the Habitat Partner Universities Initiative will be essential for keeping individual commitment among university staff as well as UN-HABITAT officials.

University commitment

For universities, it is important that the initiative focus on the direct benefits for universities, with a minimum of administrative requirements from UN-HABITAT. Universities in the south, in particular the highly regarded ones, are often approached by UN agencies and other international actors, and with limited resources the university needs to have a strong justification for joining an international Initiative. The cost-benefit ratio has to be clearly positive. In order to take into account the differing wants and needs of universities across the world, diversity in types of engagement is recommended.

Administrative and regulatory constraints at UN-HABITAT

One of the things mentioned by almost everybody is the administrative constraints of the UN system. The UN administrative and bureaucratic tradition with its silo-type structure, specific rules, legislation and working culture sometimes forms a barrier to new ideas, and time frames for realization which can result in ideas and initiatives getting stuck, or "lost" in the system. Obstacles in relation to staff exchange were mentioned by many interviewees.

Supporting and sustaining networks

Furthermore, managing and sustaining global networks takes large amounts of time and energy, as well as sensitivity to regional and cultural issues. It can also be expensive, e.g. if the networking is based on extensive international travel, or if specific services are provided to members of the network. A common

mistake is to make a network structurally dependant on a certain volume of economic resources which are only given as a one-off grant to support the establishment. It is often easier for donors and funders to support a certain activity, or product, than keeping a network running.

Furthermore, for universities in many parts of the world, there would have to be strong incentives to engage in global networks, especially if the engagement took place in English. Running global networks are resource intensive, if they are to go beyond web based interaction.

Strategic advice to UN-HABITAT

The consultancy team would like to emphasize that the Habitat Partner Universities Initiative is in a situation where it has to be given the attention, profile, visibility, resources, set-up and governance it needs to fulfill the potential it clearly has. It is important to notice here that this is an issue to be addressed at institutional level at universities and UN-HABITAT programs, and should not be left to the individual.

A more strategic prioritization of activities under the Habitat Partner Universities label is needed.

- Focus on the Initiative as a platform and an interface between UN-HABITAT and universities
- Focus less on the Initiative as an abstract network and more on the bilateral partnerships and concrete agenda of activities.
- In setting up the Habitat Partner Universities partnerships, the level of activity within them should be the main target, with less emphasis on formalities.
- Introduce a Steering Committee with the mandate to make strategic decisions on activities.
- Develop a Habitat Partner Universities Office with the main goal to catalyze and facilitate activities among the partners.
- Put more effort into finding ways of attracting, and involving universities in the global south. Starting with the desired end result of the cooperation – benefit to sustainable urbanization and improvement in basic needs including shelter and services for the urban poorest, the chances of reaching the poor in terms of tangible results, positive policy implications and also institutional development matching these main tasks of relevance for the university.

Proposal for a dual role Habitat Partner Universities Initiative:

Our proposal suggests that the Initiative has dual roles; the Habitat Partner Universities initiative as such, with its own activities, and as catalyst and interface. In the latter role, the Initiative needs to develop a bridging, linking, match-making and facilitating capacity.

The overall objectives of the Initiative should be to:

- Increase the role and level of engagement of universities in promoting sustainable urbanization through education, research, knowledge management and institutional strengthening,
- Offer an efficient and effective interface for exchange between the most active and highly qualified personnel in urban knowledge at the academic institutions and UN-HABITAT
- Strengthen global, regional, national and local evidence-based urban policy, and increase the role and level of engagement of UN-HABITAT in using and promoting urban research, training and education in its operations and policy making activities, in particular in regards to the global south. The aim should also be to make such knowledge and capacity more accessible and relevant to actors at city level.

The long term outcomes of the cooperation should be:

- Integration of principles of sustainable urban development into the curricula of relevant university departments,
- Creation of active platforms for dialogue and collaboration between universities, local government, civil society, communities and the private sector on sustainable urban development challenges and opportunities.
- Partnerships to consolidate education for sustainable urban development in universities, leading to key university and professional association staff becoming more confident, committed and knowledgeable about sustainable urban development approaches.

Features of the Habitat Partner Universities initiative

- *Partnerships*
- *membership*

- Platform
- Program: an agenda of activities
- Office
- Focal Points
- Steering Committee
- Governance, management and funding (GMF) structures

Habitat Partner Universities Partnerships

Strong and substantive partnerships between UN-HABITAT and each partner university is the backbone of the initiative. UN-HABITAT should revise the basis for partnership together with each university, in order to establish a new generation of partnership agreements, based on realistic expectations and a variety of substantive content. A few basic elements should form the cooperation agreement:

- Introduction to the Initiative
- Level of ambition and commitment of the cooperation/partnership (e.g. basic – Silver – Gold)
- Profile of the University; what does the University have to offer?
- What will the University get in return from participating in the Initiative?
- Set-up at the University: Focal Point, other participating departments/institutes
- Minimal regulatory and administrative framework

Some of the key principles in the ToR are the following:

- Systemic approach towards sustainable urban development
- Focus on urban poverty reduction
- Inter-disciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity
- Practice oriented
- Linking local, community, regional, global levels
- Institutional commitment from university

What UN-HABITAT and the university respectively are offering within the frame of the agreement should be semi-flexible, regarding the level of ambition as well as the terms and conditions of agreements, in order to see if certain simplifications or even exceptions can be made. We recommend that the Initiative focuses on direct partnerships and activities rather than being driven by administrative and regulatory requirements of contracts.

Habitat Partner Universities membership

The idea is to have differentiation of levels of commitment between different universities, such as basic – silver – gold. A higher level of commitment from a university also gives the university access to more services and options through the Initiative, following a basic principle that the more you put into the cooperation, the more you can get out of it. For example, only Gold level universities can be members of the Steering Committee, or recipients of 'UN-HABITAT' chairs, whereas the basic level gives access to some basic services, and invitations to seminars, conferences, etc. The idea is that universities can move between these levels in accordance with changing priorities and capacities over time.

Basic partnerships: The University or a single faculty/school of a university subscribes to UN-HABITAT information on issues related to sustainable urban development, they want to be "in the loop" and receive information on Habitat Partner Universities activities, participate in the general exchange of information. The requirement is that a senior faculty/school official is nominated as point of contact.

Silver partnerships (in addition to the above): The University is actively involved in cooperation with UN-HABITAT on issues related to sustainable development, e.g. participate in meetings and send students to work as interns. Silver members also contribute actively to the networking between universities, for example facilitating staff exchanges between north-south, accepting guest researchers, teachers and students, and participate at least occasionally in joint projects. The silver level should be restricted and a reasonable target is 40-60 universities as silver members.

Gold partnerships (in addition to the above): The university has a very high level of commitment, activity and contribution. It should be noted that "contribution" here does not necessarily mean financial contribution to the Habitat Partner Universities activities. It can also be in terms of time allocation to Habitat Partner Universities activities, expertise, dissemination of results in cooperation with UN-HABITAT on issues related to sustainable urban development, for example participate in joint research projects, curricula development, and joint communication activities such as policy advice and a database. Gold members should have a Habitat Partner Universities focal point with sufficient resources to act as such, and the top management of such a university should be prepared to allocate university resources to working on the Habitat agenda

issues, and ready to sign on to this. The target should be 20-25 gold members.

Habitat Partner Universities Platform

The Initiative should provide a platform for joint activities in research, education and knowledge management, but also for networking and staff exchange and debate. It should have a basic support infrastructure including both material and human resources in the Habitat Partner Universities Office, which will be provided by UN-HABITAT. The Habitat Partner Universities can be seen as a pool of expertise, which can be used as a brokerage arena for developing and promoting ideas and activities, matching expertise and facilitating fund raising.

Examples of how UN-HABITAT can contribute to the Habitat Partner Universities Platform:

- UN-HABITAT can establish an efficient and effective secretariat/office for the Initiative.
- UN-HABITAT can develop a strategy for staff exchange with the universities
- UN-HABITAT can manage and enhance relevant funding opportunities for Habitat Partner Universities activities

Examples of how universities can contribute to the Habitat Partner Universities Platform:

- universities can each offer an Habitat Partner Universities focal point with sufficient resources for internal/external coordination and mobilization.
- universities can develop links with actors at the national level
- universities can commit to active collaboration with UN-HABITAT in concrete projects
- universities can actively engage in mobilizing expertise through facilitating staff exchange between different universities and also between universities and UN-HABITAT

Habitat Partner Universities Program: an agenda of activities

A clear agenda of activities (work program) and support functions should be defined, strongly linked to the UN-HABITAT medium term strategy, and leading to tangible deliverables. The balance between theoretical academic work and urban policy/action is an important issue. The risk of damage to academic integrity if university researchers and teachers become too deeply involved in policy making has to be respected, while at the same time welcoming, and developing effective operational modes for universities to perform their advisory roles.

The agenda should be updated and adopted on a yearly basis by the Habitat Partner Universities Steering Committee (see below). We recommend starting with a limited number of activities, in order to clarify the initiative, build up the Habitat Partner Universities Platform and engage university partners.

Habitat Partner Universities Mainstream activities:

Education

- Development of short continuing education courses in fields linked to urban sustainability
- Academic collaboration in the form of joint courses and collaborative curriculum development
- Awarding of UN-HABITAT chairs in sustainable urban development
- Collaborative student work in the field and in studio-related disciplines

Research

- PhD student research and other forms of research collaboration

Knowledge management

- Joint seminars and other events, such as visiting seminar series
- RMIT knowledge management type of activities (Global Compact)
- UBC – Habitat Archive

Habitat Partner Universities catalytic activities:

Education

- Academic collaboration in the form of joint courses and collaborative curriculum development
- Collaborative student work in the field and in studio-related disciplines
- Higher educational policy development
- Supporting inter-university networking

Research

- PhD student research, PhD Workshops and other forms of research collaboration
- Supporting inter-university networking

Knowledge management

- Internship of students at UN-HABITAT Headquarters or Regional Offices
- Mapping expertise at universities
- Updating and distributing information on UN-Habitat activities

Habitat Partner Universities Office

The Habitat Partner Universities Office should support the Habitat Partner Universities Platform and the Steering Committee with secretarial, administrative and financial management. The Office should also be a “driver” of the Initiative which involves, for example, preparing meetings, coordinating some of the joint activities, and being the link between different parts of the network. It is essential that the secretariat/office is updated on the programs/processes and projects.

Our recommendation is to set up the office initially at UN-HABITAT, in order to ensure continuity and avoid regional imbalance and/or one university becoming too dominant. An absolute minimum of two full time staff is necessary with at least one staff member with experience from working at a university. UN-HABITAT can also consider the opportunity of outsourcing some of the managerial and support functions to universities, on a voluntary basis. However, this should not be done to an extent which makes the management fragmented.

Focal Points

Internal ownership of the Initiative at UN-HABITAT on the one side and at each university on the other is crucial for its success. The initiative would benefit largely if each university, in particular among those with a higher level of commitment, appoints a focal point as an interface between the various university departments and the Initiative.

The position of the Initiative within UN-HABITAT is an important issue. It should be logical to UN-HABITAT staff, and easily accessible. The responsible unit should preferably already have good links with universities and sufficient resources for acting as an internal Focal Point in a similar way to the university Focal Points.

Steering Committee

A Steering Committee with representatives from UN-HABITAT, universities, donors and a few independent members should be established. The Committee should be responsible for the long-term strategic considerations, and for adopting an annual agenda of activities.

The Committee should be appointed by the Executive Director of UN-HABITAT and each member should have a time limited appointment. The Committee should be rather limited in size, for example limited to 15 members (3-4 UN-HABITAT representatives, 5-6 university representatives and 5-6 donor/independent representatives). The Committee should meet on a regular basis, once or twice every year, preferably in conjunction with other interesting events, such as the World Urban Forum. The aim should be to also have a good distribution between regions, fields of expertise within urban development and the Habitat agenda within in the Committee.

Governance, management and funding structures:

The Governance, Management and Funding structures should allow for connections across the various programs of UN-HABITAT. Furthermore, they should correspond to regional variation between the universities, the Habitat Partner Universities activities and the character of urban issues involved.

We recommend a strategy for funding of activities in the Habitat Partner Universities Program in which a limited number of activities are given the status of core activity. UN-HABITAT should, together with key universities, approach donors and funding agencies in a systematic way to secure long-term funding of core activities. For example, by engaging funders in the Steering Committee, their interests can be enhanced and the funders will most likely be more likely to offer resources to core functions.

With the exception of core activities, each activity will have to be funded in a customized way, and should have secured funding before the Steering Committee can adopt it in the Habitat Partner Universities Program.

Next steps

Of high priority is the building of the infrastructure for the Habitat Partner Universities Initiative, and not just starting a bouquet of nice projects. As a first step, the following concrete measures need to be taken:

- Setting up an Habitat Partner Universities Office and assigning full time staff.
- Allocating a core budget to implement the recommendations of this study
- Revising existing partnership agreements in order to ensure continued commitment at a realistic level for each partner university.

- Establishing a Steering Committee.

Once the initial steps have been taken, the next phase involves:

- Inviting selected universities and UN-HABITAT representatives to a Habitat Partner Universities program concept workshop with the objective to identify priority activities and discuss the partnership agreements.
- Identifying “champions” for the Habitat agenda
- Mapping of all the individual contacts between UN-HABITAT and university researchers, teachers and executives.
- Mapping of “who is doing what in urban research and education?”
- Identifying needs among partner universities and UN-HABITAT for specific deliverables which could be developed by the Habitat Partner Universities Initiative.

Comments by the consultancy team

The richness of expectations, opportunities and possible benefits expressed in the interviews, and at the Habitat Partner Universities event at WUF, is enormous.

Adding all these ideas and expectations into a list of requirements on the Initiative would definitely turn the Initiative into a “Mädchen für alles”, which would make it less articulated and most likely the Habitat Partner Universities idea would be dead in a few years.

Instead, we propose a strategic prioritization:

Firstly, by focusing on the Habitat Partner Universities as an interface between UN-HABITAT and universities, and by developing a Habitat Partner Universities Office with the goal of catalyzing and facilitating activities among the partners. Priority should thus be given to reinvigorating the Initiative and setting up the Habitat Partner Universities Office as a facilitating agent.

Secondly, starting a limited number of activities, with the objective of building up the Habitat Partner Universities platform and engaging university partners in this work will help to make the initiative clear and visible.

Thirdly, identifying a limited number of concrete products to be delivered during the first 2-3 years would make the Initiative more transparent, visible and distinctive. A production plan for each of these deliverables should be agreed between the partners involved, with clear time frames, budget, responsibilities and division of tasks.